

EGYPTIAN TOMB RELIEFS OF THE OLD KINGDOM

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As in all periods of Egyptian history, our knowledge of the life of the people of the Old Kingdom, especially the wealthy official class, is derived chiefly from the decoration and contents of their tombs.

Throughout the Old and Middle Kingdoms the principal type of tomb for private individuals buried in the flat, open desert adjacent to the capital city of Memphis was the *mastabeh*. At Gizeh, Abusir, Saqqāreh, Daḥshūr, and Medūm we find the mastabeh tombs of the nobles and officials grouped in formal rows or blocks about the pyramids of the pharaohs under whom their owners served and by whose bounty many of the tombs themselves were built and endowed. This type of tomb had four essential parts: (1) the substructure, consisting of the subterranean burial chamber and the stairway or shaft leading to it; (2) the rectangular mass of masonry which comprised the superstructure, or mastabeh proper, faced on the outside with a paneled or smooth casing of brick or limestone; (3) the chapel, built beside or in the superstructure and housing the great stela, or "false door," to which offerings were brought by the family and mortuary priests of the deceased and before which the funerary services were performed; and (4) the *serdab*, or statue chamber, usually a secret and inaccessible room in the superstructure, where the portrait statues of the deceased and members of his family were placed.

Relief sculpture and painting appeared in mastabeh tombs at the end of the Third Dynasty. The first part of the tomb so decorated was the rectangular lintel over the false-door stela, whereon the deceased is shown seated before the funerary repast. Subsequently the chapel walls were decorated with a panorama of the dead man's earthly possessions and of his servants producing everything essential to his

welfare, in the belief that these presentments of reality were endowed with the essence of the originals and would supply him with his needs for all time. The stela is usually inscribed with appropriate offering formulae and with the name and titles of the owner of the tomb. Large figures of the deceased and of members of his family occur on salient architectural elements, such as the jambs of the entrance doorway of the chapel, the lateral panels of the stela, and the jambs and reveals of the stela niche.

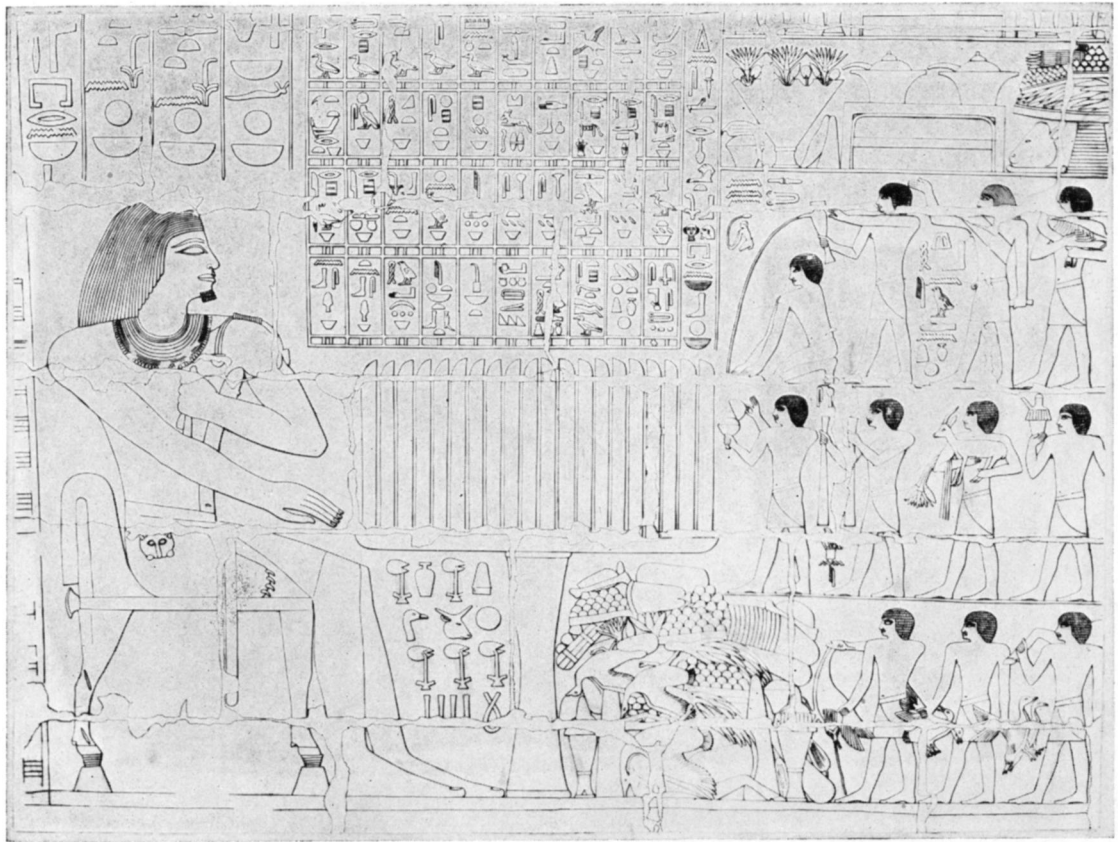
In the reign of King Wenis of the Fifth Dynasty (about 2440 B.C.) the Lord Chamberlain, Pery-nēb, son of the Vizier Shepses-Rē', built for himself a small mastabeh in that part of the Old Kingdom cemetery at Saqqāreh which lies to the west of the pyramid of King Woser-ka'ef, the founder of the dynasty, and immediately to the north of the ancient funerary enclosure of King Djoser of the Third Dynasty. This mastabeh was brought to New York in 1913, and its massive structure and brightly colored reliefs have long been familiar to visitors to the Egyptian Department. It has also been the subject of several Museum publications. Recently the lighting of the courtyard of the tomb has been intensified in order to show the façade and the relief figures of Pery-nēb on the jambs of the doorway as they originally appeared in the brilliant glare of the Egyptian sun.

The relief sculptures from three other tomb chapels of the Old Kingdom are less well known. Since two of these groups have been newly installed and the third has been placed on exhibition for the first time, a brief discussion of each may be of interest.

Near the site once occupied by the tomb of Pery-nēb at Saqqāreh lies the mastabeh of Prince Re'em-kay, eldest son of King Isesy of the Fifth Dynasty and a contemporary of Pery-nēb. The decorated blocks from the chapel of



The Museum's Egyptian Expedition taking down the tomb of Pery-nēb at Saqqāreh in 1913. ABOVE: Removing lintel of the main doorway; BELOW: hauling lintel away



Funerary banquet scene, painted relief from the tomb of Pery-nēb at Saqqāreh about 2440 B.C. Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1913. From a drawing by Lindsley F. Hall. Reliefs from this tomb and the tombs illustrated on the following pages are shown in the newly installed galleries of the Department of Egyptian Art.

Re-em-kay's mastabeh were purchased from the Egyptian Government and brought to the Museum in 1908. For many years they were exhibited in a little chamber reproducing the form of the original chapel, but recently they have been spread out on two adjoining walls of the Second Egyptian Room, where they can be seen and studied to greater advantage than heretofore. This they richly deserve.

The reliefs of Re-em-kay are masterpieces of Fifth Dynasty sculpture. The color has been almost entirely lost, but its disappearance need not be deplored; for the delicacy of the modeling and the charm and vivacity of the drawing are all the more apparent. The purpose of the decoration was to assure perpetually to the dead the good things of this life, as in Pery-nēb's tomb, but in this case the artist has chosen to

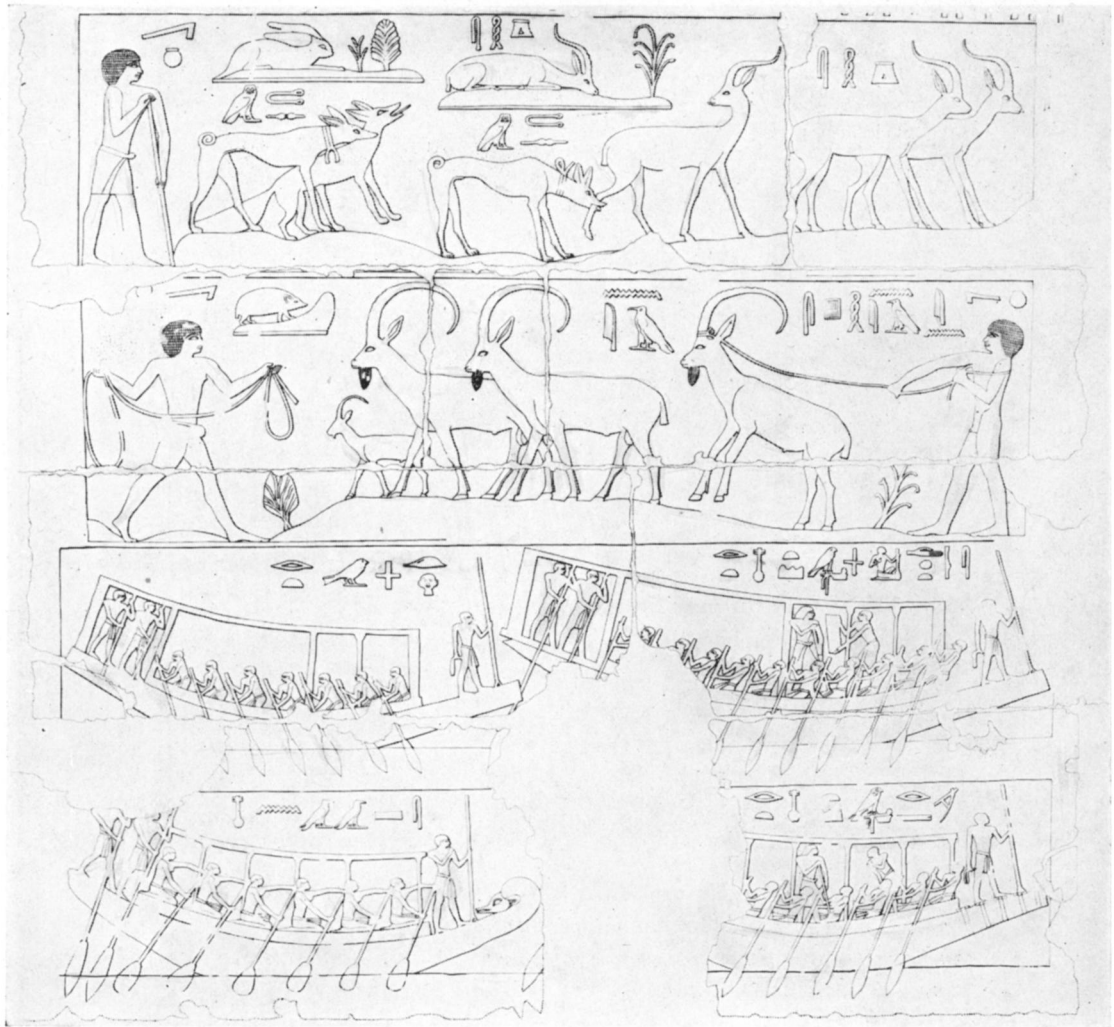
show the whole activity of an estate rather than merely the routine presentation of offerings. Hence we have in small compass, but drawn with all the perfection of the best Old Kingdom art, a comprehensive picture of the everyday life of the time.

The jambs of the entrance passage and what were originally the north and west walls of the chapel are largely taken up with the service of the tomb and with the preparation and serving of Re-em-kay's funerary banquet. In the lowest register of the west wall, to the right of the great stela, is a lively scene of Re-em-kay's fowlers netting waterfowl for his larder and poultry runs. This is a scene which early became conventionalized, but never dull and hackneyed, in its treatment by the Egyptian, whose observation was born of his intense love of country

life. Particularly interesting is the variety in the drawings of the birds caught in the clapnet and the attempt to show in unconventional attitudes such undistinguished individuals as the naked peasants who haul the rope.

Below the offering list on the adjoining south wall of the chapel Re-em-kay's huntsmen course and lasso antelope in the hilly slopes bordering the Nile Valley. Over rolling terrain, with here and there a desert shrub, the lean Slūghi hounds, slipped by the hunter at the left of the scene, have run down and seized a desert fox and one of a trio of slender gazelles. Two

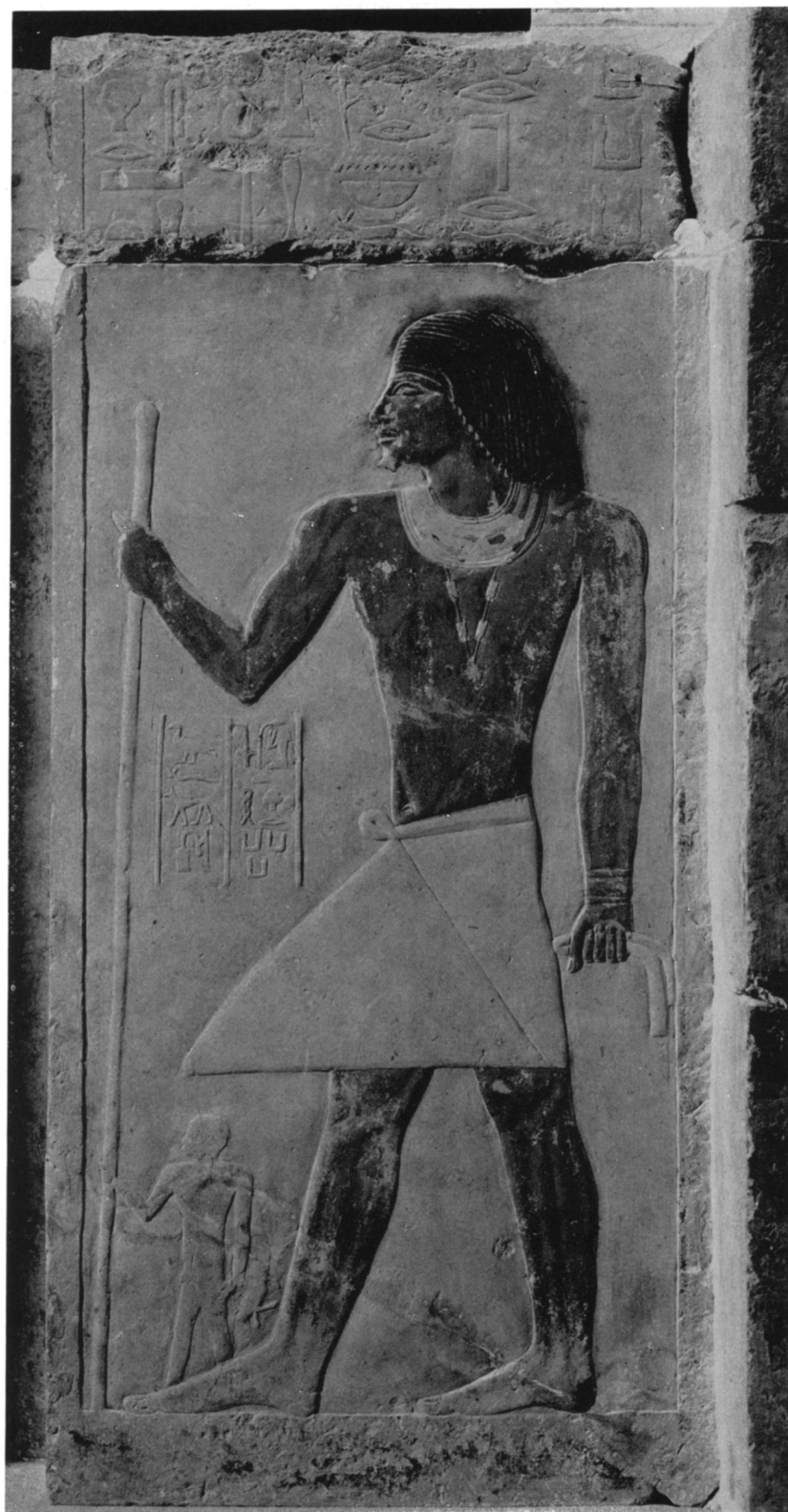
other huntsmen have crept up on a small herd of the slim-horned Nubian ibex and are roping the beasts with their palm-fiber lariats. Unhampered here by the conventions which restrained him in the execution of more formal subjects, the Egyptian artist has drawn the animals with great charm, with remarkable fidelity, and with the closest observation of anatomy. Even the huntsmen have been caught in lively and, for the most part, successful poses. In the vibrant pattern of the whole scene we can overlook the fact that the bounding dash of the frightened gazelle and the loping run of the great hounds



Limestone reliefs from the tomb of Re-em-kay at Saḫḫāreh, about 2460 B.C. ABOVE: Huntsmen coursing and lassoing game; BELOW: Re-em-kay's fleet of Nile ships. Rogers Fund, 1908. From a drawing by Lindsley F. Hall



Painted reliefs from the tomb of Ny-kau-Ḥōr at Saḫḫāreh, about 2500 B.C. Rogers Fund, 1907. ABOVE: A game of “senet,” which somewhat resembles backgammon; BELOW: a flutist and a clarinetist accompanying singers, who use formal gestures of the hands in the interpretation of their songs. OPPOSITE: The judge Ny-kau-Ḥōr, on a jamb of his false-door stela



have been slowed down to a sedate amble—the Old Kingdom artist rarely succeeded in producing a sense of real movement in his figures.

Re-em-kay's fleet of ships, navigating the waters of the "Goodly West"—that is, the Hereafter—are blunt-ended craft of wood, equipped with long frames for the awnings which protected their passengers, crews, and cargoes from the heat of the sun. Three of the ships are driven by oars with long, pointed blades, the fourth, by broad, rounded paddles. All are fitted with two steering oars, or "rudders," bearing against the rails of the ships well aft. Under the awning of the leading ship Re-em-kay himself appears, leaning upon a staff and inspecting an open roll of papyrus which his steward holds before him.

In the great scene which occupies most of the east wall of the chapel Re-em-kay inspects the activities and products of his estates. His dignified and wholly conventional figure, standing like a gigantic hieroglyph at the right of the scene, contrasts sharply with those of the herdsmen bringing up his cattle and poultry and the peasants at work in his fields. In the harvest scene at the bottom of the wall, as in the portrayals of the animals above, the artist depicted the activities of his patron's estate with painstaking accuracy, knowing full well that his work would be judged by generations of critical farmers. The mowing, transportation, stacking, and threshing of the wheat are shown. On the threshing floor a herd of seven small donkeys, beaten and prodded by their excited drivers, mill around in a circle, threshing out the grain with their hooves. The confused circle of animals is well handled by the Old Kingdom draughtsman, even if the number of legs is insufficient for the heads depicted and the articulation between heads and legs is often vague.

Scarcely a hundred yards east of the tomb of Re-em-kay at Saqqāreh and less than two hundred feet from the site of Pery-nēb's tomb lies a mastabeh built some generations earlier by a judge named Ny-kau-Ḥōr for himself and for "his beloved wife," Sekhem-Ḥat-Ḥōr. In 1908 the west wall of the decorated chapel of this mastabeh was brought to New York, together with the reliefs from the chapel of Re-em-kay. It has been newly installed in its entirety in a

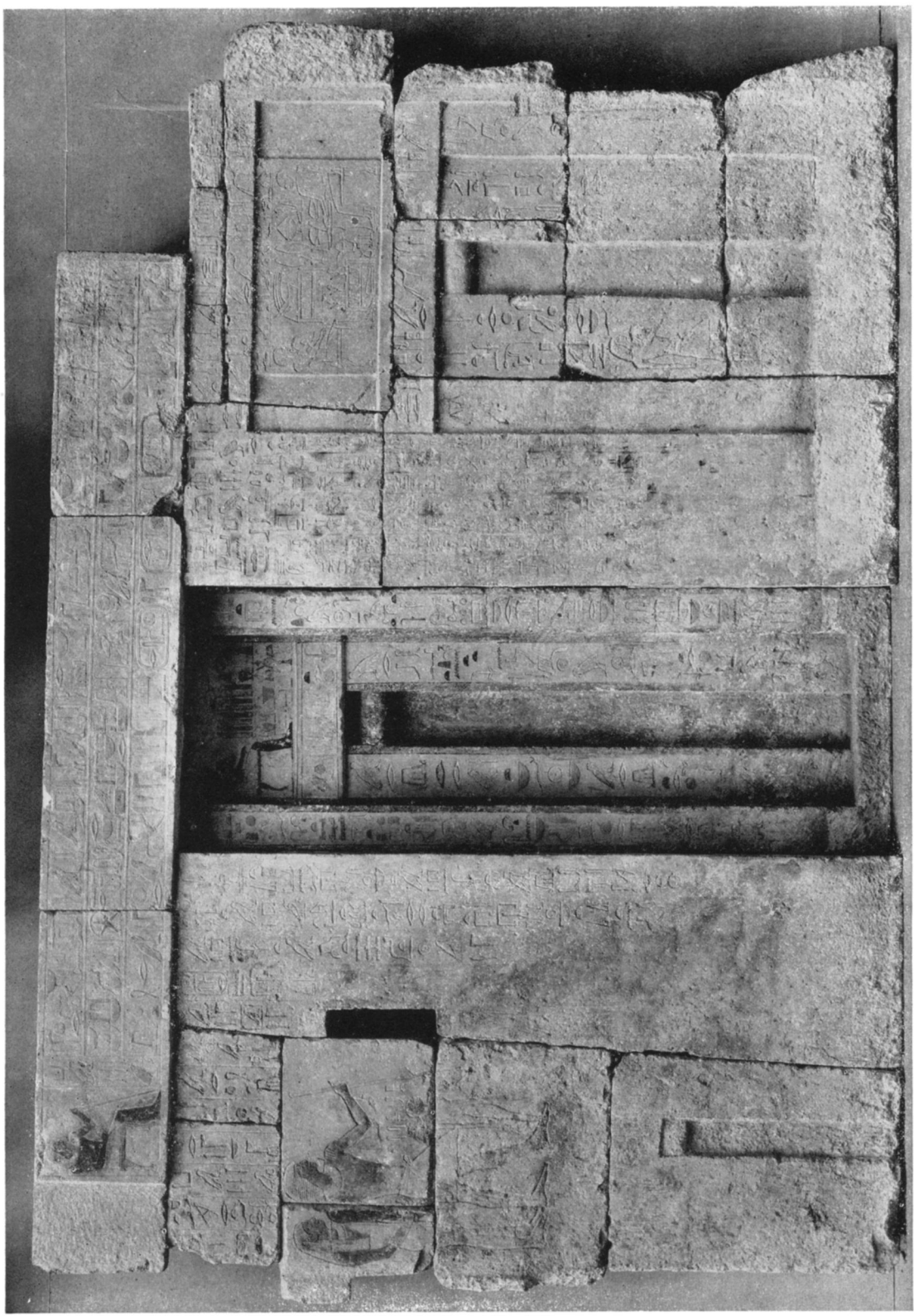
well-lighted case on the right side of the entrance lobby in front of the mastabeh of Pery-nēb.

The wall is adorned with two false-door stelae of equal size and similar type, one for the spirit of Ny-kau-Ḥōr and the other for the spirit of his wife. On the jambs of the left-hand stela Ny-kau-Ḥōr is depicted in conventional pose and attire, accompanied by the tiny figures of his sons, each grasping a small bird which we have no difficulty in recognizing as a crested hoopoe. The figure and titles of Ny-kau-Ḥōr also take precedence on the jambs of the right-hand false door, where man and wife are depicted together. The stone portière of the doorway, however, is inscribed for Sekhem-Ḥat-Ḥōr only, and in the panel above we see her seated alone at her funerary banquet, the scene flanked on either side by the small figures of her daughters.

The major interest in these reliefs lies in the scene at the top of the broad section of wall between the stelae, wherein two guests at the banquet amuse themselves after the meal with a game of draughts, while an orchestra, probably also composed of guests, provides music for their entertainment. The draughts-players are just commencing a game of *senet*, a favorite table game of the ancient Egyptians, played with twelve to fourteen pieces on a board of thirty squares. Moves were determined by rolling knucklebones, the primitive equivalent of dice, and the play in general resembled that of our modern game of backgammon. "Play, comrade," says the man on the left. "Here's the play, comrade," replies his opponent, making his initial move.

The musicians consist of three singers, who accompany their vocal offerings with formal and carefully studied gestures of the hands, and three instrumentalists, who play, respectively, on the bow harp, the vertical flute, and the double clarinet. That a special type of vocalization was devised to accompany the playing of each particular instrument is indicated by the hieroglyphic labels written over the heads of the singers: "Singing to the harp," "Singing to the flute," and "Singing to the clarinet."

Approximately five hundred yards east of the site of the tomb of Pery-nēb at Saqqāreh lies a



The west wall of the chapel built for Kay-em-sneŭy in his family mastabeh at Sakhāreh, about 2410 B.C.; Rogers Fund, 1926. Recently placed on exhibition for the first time

group of mastabehs built during the early years of the Sixth Dynasty and forming part of the cemetery surrounding the pyramid of King Teti (2420-2408 B.C.), the founder of the dynasty. Close beside the northwest corner of the enclosure wall of the pyramid and immediately to the southwest of the huge and magnificently decorated tombs of the Viziers Gemni-kay and Mererū-kay is a smaller mastabeh of brick, constructed for the family of the Overseer of the Granary, Sehotpu, and containing five small cruciform chapels for the various members of the family. The largest and finest of these chapels was built and inscribed for Sehotpu's son, the Overseer of the Granary, Kay-em-snēwy, and a close relative, Wēr-djed-Ptah. The west wall of this chapel was purchased in 1926 by the Metropolitan Museum and is now exhibited for the first time immediately opposite that of Ny-kau-Ḥōr.

Two thirds of the wall of the chapel, including the great central stela and the bulk of the inscribed surfaces on either side of it, are dedicated to Kay-em-snēwy. The stela, except for the colored bands of inscription, was painted to resemble red granite. The skillful, if not deceptive, imitation of the costly stone is especially evident in the narrow central slot and on the cylindrical drum at its top. The unfinished lower portions of the columns of text provide us with an excellent opportunity to study the drawing and cutting of monumental inscriptions at every stage of completion: the preliminary sketch in red ink, the finished drawing in black outline, and the partially and the completely carved hieroglyphic sign.

Beside a slot, which once connected the

chapel with the small *serdab* behind, are carved the figures of Kay-em-snēwy and his family. The latter include "his beloved wife, the Familiar of the King and Priestess of Ḥat-Ḥōr, Iret-nūb," "his son, Shepses-Ptah," and a small person, holding a bird and a lotus flower, who may be a priest or a younger son. The small unfinished stela below the figures was probably intended for the spirit of the wife, Iret-nūb.

The right-hand section of the chapel wall is occupied by the stela of the Judge and Scribe Wēr-djed-Ptah, evidently a close relative and perhaps a younger brother of Kay-em-snēwy. The stela is similar in most respects to those which we have already encountered, but in the rectangular panel above the false door we see both the owner and his wife, Khenwet, seated face to face at their funerary banquet.

A comparison of the incised decoration of Kay-em-snēwy's chapel with the delicate reliefs of Ny-kau-Ḥōr shows us that, during the century between the execution of these two works, the art of the Old Kingdom had begun to grow stale and hackneyed, the figures and hieroglyphs attenuated and angular, the modeling insensitive, and the work in general mechanical and lifeless. In the subject matter of the reliefs less wall space is devoted to lively scenes, crowded with amusing incident, and more emphasis is placed on long hieroglyphic texts consisting, in large part, of stereotyped offering formulae. Fortunately this tendency—fostered, no doubt, by the commercialization of funerary art—was not yet universal, and many of the monuments of the kings and great nobles of the Sixth Dynasty were conceived with imagination and executed with surpassing skill.